

Less courtesy for tailpipe emissions, please

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Body

Automobile enthusiasts can breathe a sigh of relief now that Toronto's new climate action plan, approved by city council last month, is in place. The plan largely perpetuates polite suggestions aimed at cutting tailpipe emissions. But with climate change impacts quickly closing in on us, it's clearly time for a more assertive approach.

Transportation accounts for 36 per cent, or 5.6 million tonnes annually, of the city's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. These emissions, predominantly from personal vehicles, don't even include the production and refining of oil, much of it from Alberta's tarsands.

True, cars are very useful, perhaps essential, for some fraction of trips - but with the driver as judge, most car trips have become "essential," despite viable options that include mass transit, carpooling, cycling, walking, or simply foregoing some trips.

It's no surprise that avid motorists and their council champions react indignantly to the slightest motoring inconvenience.

For many decades, governments have responded to, even anticipated, demands for more roads with "how much?" or "how wide?" Automakers and many motorists have repaid this largesse with cavalier attitudes, clogging roads with absurdly sized, gas-guzzling vehicles, now including monster pickups, treating climate change as someone else's problem.

Public consultations for new busways, bikeways, or wider sidewalks typically kick off with an apology to motorists for any potential delay in travel times or lost parking spots, as if to appease a vengeful deity. An observer might conclude that walking, cycling, and transit are the root causes of climate change.

Our politicians were once bolder. In 1971, Premier Bill Davis stopped the southern extension of the Spadina Expressway, bucking a North American trend. In 1973, Toronto mayor David Crombie declared that the city would not be widening roads, adding: "Sure, everyone has the right to come downtown ... [but they don't] necessarily have the right to bring a ton of steel."

The city's TransformTO climate plan envisions major GHG cuts, but for automobile emissions it goes little further than to coax motorists, with public money, to step out of their gasoline-powered vehicles and into electric vehicles (EVs).

The same strategy curiously envisions that 75 per cent of all school/work trips under five kilometres will be travelled on foot, bikes, and transit by 2030. But how are walking, cycling, and transit to become more appealing when there will be the same number of cars, demanding at least the same amount of space?

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Yes, EVs are preferable to fossil-fueled cars, a fact we've known since the early 1900s when electrics were a popular choice among Toronto's motorists. But today we have far too many cars using far too much energy, occupying far too much urban space, and killing and injuring far too many people to justify the perpetuation of a car-based transportation model.

The climate crisis requires an urgent, aggressive reallocation of road space from cars to create a more welcoming road environment that optimizes the cleaner options of walking, cycling, and transit.

Albert Koehl is an environmental lawyer, a road safety advocate, and a founder of the Toronto Community Bikeways Coalition.

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